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SUBJECT: TFIZ01: VIETNAM UPDATE MARCH 21

REF: A. HANOI 0684 B. HANOI 0676 C. HANOI 0651

1. (U) Vietnamese television, radio, and newspapers on March 20 and March 21 highlighted international protests against military action in Iraq, including another slew of mass pro-peace "meetings" throughout Vietnam that were described as involving at least tens of thousands of Vietnamese citizens in various locations. However, coverage was virtually non-existent of the very small student protests across the street from the Chancery on March 19 and March 20. (Comment: Failure to publicize these protests may indicate that they did not have any official sanction and that the GVN does not want to encourage any spontaneous demonstrations on this or other issues. End comment)

2. (U) Media also emphasized the tough remarks made by the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman on May 20, calling the military action a "gross violation of the fundamental principles of international law" that was an "extremely dangerous precedent," condemning the hostilities, and "strongly" demanding an "immediate" end. Unusually, the language referred to US and UK "power holders" (nha cam quyen) rather than "authorities" (chinh quyen) or "governments" (chinh phu), a throw-back to Cold War-era language that connotes an illegitimate regime. (An MFA official assured Pol/C on March 21, however, that no disrespect or negative connotation was intended, merely an effort to point to a few decision-makers, rather than the entire Administration.) Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien, the only other senior official quoted in the press, similarly referred to military action as a "bad precedent" that will "harm peace, security, and all aspects of political and economic life the world over." A Voice of Vietnam commentary on March 20 predicted that "cruelty and destruction" in this war could kill as many as four million people, and claimed that the US purpose was first to seize control of Iraq's oil fields and eventually become "master of the world."

3. (U) The MFA spokeswoman nonetheless pledged on March 20 that Vietnam had taken "all necessary measures to ensure the security of our people, foreign diplomatic facilities and foreigners in Vietnam" and promised that Vietnam would remain a "truly safe destination." She also confirmed that no Vietnamese remained in Iraq, with about 20 officials, families, students, and workers having already departed.

4. (U) Security coverage at the Chancery and Rose Garden annex remained good. Police responded quickly to another student protest (apparently, a mix of high school and university age) at the Chancery in mid-afternoon on March 20. This one was louder than previous ones. At one point, a brick was thrown and hit the front of the Embassy, but there were no other negative aspects. An expected demonstration at the Australian Embassy apparently did not take place.

5. (U) Similar to cancellations of meetings with GVN and CPV officials on March 20 (ref a), a senior official of the Office of Government unexpectedly canceled a March 21 meeting with Econ/C, claiming a sudden meeting on Iraq chaired by the Prime Minister. His office later declined to reschedule during the week of March 24. However, the MFA Americas Department deputy director met with Pol/C on March 21 at our request to deliver a demarche on Iraq (ref a and septel).

6. (U) CONS issued Department-approved warden message on March 20. No Amcits have called to express concern for their safety or offer opinions on the war, although numerous Vietnamese have asked whether the Consular Section would continue to issue visas. (Yes.) There has been a marked increase in Amcit registrations, but it is not possible to determine whether this was due to the worldwide caution or to a different series of warden messages on the SARS outbreak.
BURGHARDT